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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 KABUL 003198

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER ASEC PINS AF
SUBJECT: KARZAI: A LAME DUCK PRESIDENT?

REF: KABUL 3088

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Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES, A.I. RICHARD NORLAND FOR REASONS
1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: With the Middle East again in turmoil, Washington does not need a leadership crisis involving President Karzai) and the good news is that he is not in immediate danger of political collapse. The bad news, however, is that public confidence has eroded badly in recent weeks, as his political opponents and the insurgency exploit the leadership and information vacuum caused by Karzai,s dithering on key governance issues and by the slow pace of reconstruction. Over the past few weeks in Kabul, we have listened to top ranked government officials, Members of Parliament, businessmen, media representatives, religious figures, teachers, students and even the unemployed, discussing &the situation8, from concerns over security and corruption to whether or not President Karzai was about to leave office. Fair or not, without exception these discussions have portrayed Karzai as weak, vacillating, inept and out of touch with normal Afghans and the life of the country. Private conversations all over the city claim President Karzai is about to leave the Presidency, or even that a "coup" is in the offing.

¶2. (C) In an earlier era this scenario could portend the imminent removal of Afghanistan,s President. However, with an elected President and Parliament, and a decisive international security and reconstruction presence (including potentially pivotal military action currently underway in the south), times are different now. But, to prevent Karzai from becoming a &lame duck8 years before the end of his term, the Presidential Palace needs to be galvanized into effective action to promote better decision making support for the President using the latest mechanisms developed in consultation between the GOA and the international community (reftel). Process alone will not suffice. We need to intensify pressure on Karzai to take concrete steps to demonstrate leadership and we need to back this up with

development assistance. Otherwise, his reputation will continue to wane and our objectives here will become harder to attain. END SUMMARY.

Security Concerns: The Talk of the Town

¶13. (C) Typical conversations in Kabul almost always touch on the security situation, which is hardly surprising, since this has been an over-riding issue among the Afghan populace since the collapse of the Taliban regime and in one way or another is a daily topic in the media. High ranking officials and their families (when their families are actually residing in Afghanistan) live in secure premises, where uniformed and armed guards control access to the walled courtyards. The guards are generally from the same town and/or ethnic group as the principal whom they are protecting. High ranking officials travel with security guards at all times, and many personally carry concealed weapons. For the mass of the Kabul population, however, these precautions are not an option. Normal Kabul residents do not feel safe traveling late in the evening, and streets and lanes empty out soon after nightfall.

¶14. (C) Afghan friends readily admit that they have weapons at home for personal protection, ranging from pistols to automatics. They do so because they feel no confidence in the ability or willingness of local police to protect them, or to come to their homes if called. As one Afghan pointed out in a recent conversation, if the police are called, they don't even answer the phone. If they eventually answer, it will take several hours for a patrol car to arrive. If and when the police do arrive, it will be far too late to take action or protect the household, and even then, their dealing with the matter will depend on the social and political connections of the parties involved. One Kabul friend

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related a recent incident of being involved in a routine car sale where the purchaser changed his mind a few days after the deal was concluded, and sent three security officers from the National Directorate of Security to enforce his renegeing on the deal. The car seller trumped him by calling on his own contacts from the Ministry of Interior, and the NDS trio left in a huff. The seller commented that if he had not had such MOI connections, the routine transaction might have led to personal injury, all over a simple car sale. To add insult to injury, many people in Kabul assume that the police themselves are often responsible for crimes against private homeowners.

¶15. (C) Overall, recent conversations have contrasted the security situation in Kabul today unfavorably to the way it was under the Taliban. Special pejorative comment is reserved for the newly appointed Kabul Police Chief, who reputedly has a long history of crime in his resume. It is incomprehensible to many people in Kabul why he was appointed to his new position by President Karzai. In other countries, the perception that security is on a downward spiral might not reflect directly on the office of a president, but since police and military appointments in Afghanistan directly involve the Palace, popular blame attaches to President Karzai himself.

¶16. (C) The bottom line in this litany of complaints and general uneasiness is that President Karzai has been in office since 2001, that he is seen by many as being largely unsuccessful in dealing with local security issues, and that his personal appointees to police positions are often directly responsible for the deteriorating situation. The Karzai record in this regard is judged a failure by many, and the fact that he himself rarely appears in a public venue in Kabul or in the provinces only adds to the public perception that he is cut off from reality on the street.

¶7. (C) Afghans in Kabul seek constant reassurance that the U.S. and coalition forces will stay on, and asked about their preferred timetable for eventual withdrawal of the western security forces, use expressions like &for at least another 10 years⁸ or &until the security situation is guaranteed⁸.

At the same time, many Kabulis express annoyance over security measures taken by these same forces. &Reckless⁸ driving by military convoys and IC vehicles, and the road blockades and detours that divert Afghan traffic from proximity to USG and other international facilities are a source of daily public irritation. The paradox extends to the way people regard President Karzai,s relationship to western governments, and particularly the USG. Visits by the Secretaries of State and Defense are appreciated by the

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public, but also perpetuates the popular impression (fanned by Taliban propaganda) that President Karzai is an American &puppet⁸ who relies on a foreign army to stay in power.

¶8. (C) The ability of the American Ambassador or the USG to call the shots in Afghanistan is a highly exaggerated part of local lore, and President Karzai,s seeming dependence on us is both appreciated because it keeps the spigot of financial assistance open, and denigrated because it makes him appear to be weak. For those Afghans who do not directly benefit from foreign aid largesse (and for those who have forgotten that they have benefited), the overwhelming impression is that President Karzai is simply a puppet who does not have the ability or the power to make his own decisions. Very credible stories of his constantly changing mind and of undue influence exerted over him by his Palace advisors are repeated over and over, and add to the perception that he is not qualified to lead the country.

¶9. (C) The additional paradox in this Afghan view of the U.S. role is that some deus ex machina figure, probably with USG support, will be able to step into Karzai,s shoes. The

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name of former Interior Minister Jalali (a U.S. citizen currently teaching at NDU) is being widely circulated, with one version having it that Jalali is even now hidden in the U.S. Embassy until the time is right. Less widely circulated rumors are attached to former U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, former Minister of Finance and Kabul University Rector Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (now living in the U.S.) and even Mustapha Zaher, a grandson of ex-King Zaher Shah (and current Administrator for Environmental Affairs) as possible presidential replacements. The rumor mill fails to take into account the need for an election if Karzai steps down, and seems to assume that one or another of these men would simply step in and take over with American or other foreign support, just as was done with a long line of other Afghan leaders in times past.

Everyone Else is Corrupt!

¶10. (C) There is an inherent paradox in the perception of Karzai,s ability to attract vital international assistance for Afghanistan, and his role as an effective domestic leader. Afghans appreciate his ability to deal on the international stage, but the vast amount of financial support he has obtained abroad is quickly forgotten when people start to complain about the lack of progress over the past four and a half years of his administration, especially when they start to talk about the corruption and ineptitude of many of his appointees. There is a vague recognition that he must balance ethnic and religious appointments among governors, ministers and police chiefs, but the result) when incompetent and corrupt appointees, some of whom have unfortunate histories of war crimes, are placed in powerful positions) outweighs the political niceties of his

balancing act. To continue the paradox, many of the same politicians who inveigh against his selections want representatives from their own political/ethnic group with the very same lack of qualification to be appointed to top positions. Down at the popular level, however, what is seen is that new police and political figures all too often simply revert to the bribery demands and ethnic games of their predecessors. Given the low salaries of government and police officials, it is hardly surprising that they soon start to require gifts for services rendered, but in the popular view the demands have become exorbitant.

¶11. (C) And bribery appears to be everywhere, at least in popular anecdote. One top MP recently described to Poloff how many gifts he routinely had to give to Cabinet Ministers and other officials in order to get import licenses for his business concerns. A Kabul resident who is trying to renovate his home described the expense encountered in order to get the necessary (and theoretically free) permits to do the work. Money is simply slipped directly to the inspectors. Stories about bribery and corruption throughout the official bureaucracy are endemic, and even touch the President's immediate family. In a discussion about drug trafficking with a high school student in a remote province some months ago, the young student looked at Poloff and stated flatly &Don't talk to us about that until President Karzai arrests his own brother (Ahmad Wali Karzai)8.

¶12. (C) The bottom line on corruption: Once again, President Karzai has been in office since late 2001, and corruption seems to have skyrocketed under his watch. A Kabul friend of Poloff commented wistfully that whatever their bad side was, the Taliban did not tolerate bribery (not entirely true), and meted out immediate justice to any official who was accused of demanding bribes for his services. Karzai is judged as unable to even keep his own house (because of widely believed stories about his brother and other family members) in order.

Fanning the Flames of Rumor

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¶13. (C) Stories that Karzai is leaving office are everywhere in Kabul and have spread to the provinces as well. Speculation goes on at the highest levels, even among those people who presumably have a stake in his staying in power. This week a Deputy Minister of Interior relayed concerns about the current perilous state of the Karzai administration to an Emboff, and an MFA officer relayed the same tale of Karzai's lack of support to another Poloff on a visit to the ministry. A Poloff in Mazar-e-Sharif has relayed rumors current there that a coup is in the offing in Kabul, and Uzbek strongman Dostum mentioned plans (will he be personally involved?) for unrest and demonstrations against the Karzai presidency. Embassy FSNs at all levels relate street gossip that claims Karzai is en route out. A similar account of Karzai as almost finished comes from the ex-King's entourage.

What Does it All Mean?

¶14. (C) If popular rumor du jour was the only criteria, Karzai would already be out of office and the political funeral games would be going on in earnest. His departure would have been of his own accord and resulted in a hurried departure from the country with his family and a few top supporters, or it would have been in the tried and tested Afghan method (as happened in recent memory to Presidents Daoud, Amin, Taraki and Najibullah) of bloody termination and unmarked graves. Another scenario would be through a coup that occurs when he is on a trip abroad (as happened to ex-King Zaher Shah). According to the Constitution, the removal or resignation of the President would see the First Vice President, Ziya Masoud (under the tutelage of his

father-in-law, former President Rabbani), assuming power until elections could take place, defined as within a 90-day time period.

¶15. (C) But rumor and gossip are not the only criteria, and conditions are very different today than in the volatile 1970s. The rumor mill - a deeply rooted tradition here - is taking on a life of its own, one that is probably out of proportion to reality, which is not that much worse than it has been over the last few years. There is a large military coalition presence which plays a vital role in maintaining overall security, and a large percent of the general population would be opposed to any resurgence of violence. The powerful Hazara minority would support every attempt to maintain stability (just as it now supports the administration because it does not want to see a return to civil strife with its recent memories of harm to the Hazara community). Many of the once-violent commanders and ex-warlords are now deeply engaged in business and real estate speculation, and a resurgence of instability would hurt their pockets. The international community plays a vital role in Afghanistan, and even the most excitable anti-Karzai ex-warlord realizes that international support is a sine qua non for Afghanistan. There is, at least at present, no one on the Afghan political horizon who could assume he had a green light from the foreign countries on which Afghanistan depends.

¶16. (C) Perhaps most important, there is now a Parliament in Afghanistan which has both legitimacy and power, and which has the constitutional mandate as well as the national voice to engage in any talk about the President's future. Parliament re-opens on July 23, and the first item on the Wolesi Jirga agenda is a discussion) certain to be televised) on security in the country, and then go on to confirming the remaining Supreme Court and Cabinet nominees. Individual MPs are fully seized with the question of the Karzai government's future, and the debate) which will directly involve many of the country's past and future leaders - is certain to both free wheeling and soul searching. At this point it is impossible to foresee where the debate will lead, but it may well be the seminal discussion that both Karzai and the government need in order to restore a sense of confidence and direction to themselves and the country.

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What Can We Do?

¶17. (C) Senior USG officials should, whenever the opportunity presents itself, encourage Karzai to take tough but carefully considered decisions. We should sustain pressure to remove incompetent and corrupt officials, especially governors and police chiefs and his brother Wali. Karzai has shown that he can and will do the right thing, but only when we and others in the international community lean on him.

¶18. (C) We should support, with people and money, the strategic communications and decision-making mechanisms outlined in reftel. These will strengthen the Presidency as an institution and facilitate the President's (Karzai and his successors) ability to place himself above the fray of daily politics.

¶19. (C) We should continue to show our support for Afghanistan's nascent democracy, and for Karzai but not just for Karzai. Our VIP visitors should increasingly interact with MPs and representatives of other institutions of the country's civil society.

¶20. (C) We should manage the ISAF transition in a way that bolsters Karzai's confidence.

¶21. (C) We should continue to help Karzai) through a mix

of assistance and discussion) to build truly national institutions, especially the Army, Police and Judiciary; to address by law and regulation those conditions that enable malfeasance and corruption; and to develop the country's infrastructure, beginning with roads and power.

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